United Nations E/CN.3/2011/17

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
7 December 2010

Original: English

Statistical Commission
Forty-second session
22-25 February 2011
Item 3 (k) of the provisional agenda*
Items for discussion and decision: implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

Report on the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report was prepared at the request of the Statistical Commission at its forty-first session (see E/2010/24, chap. I.A). It recalls the background of the adoption of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics in 1994 and of a comprehensive review of their implementation undertaken on the occasion of their tenth anniversary in 2004. The report assesses recent developments and challenges regarding the implementation of the Fundamental Principles and seeks guidance from the Commission on how to better implement them in the future. Specific points for discussion by the Commission are contained in paragraph 11 of the present report.

* E/CN.3/2011/1

10-67859 (E) 231210

Please recycle

I. Background

1. Since their inception almost twenty years ago, the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics have become a de facto code of conduct for the global statistical community. They represent the core values of our profession, and the ethical standards against which our work is being judged.

2. The Principles were first developed by the Conference of European Statisticians in the early 1990s, a time at which official statistics in various countries, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, went through a period of existential crisis. Political and economic systems were transformed and a number of new member States emerged within the Conference. As with many other functions of government, official statistics in those countries had to be restructured. Public trust in official statistics had to be built and Governments had to learn to understand the place of official statistics in this changed context. To support these processes, it was deemed useful to develop an international document that would set out the role of official statistics, as well as provide some general guidelines for the functioning of statistical systems. Thus, the Conference of European Statisticians adopted the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics in 1991 and the Principles were endorsed at the ministerial level by the plenary session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) in May 1992.

3. In the period 1992/1993, an extensive consultation with Member States was organized by the Statistical Divisions of the United Nations regional commissions. It was concluded that the Resolution adopted in Europe was of universal significance. As a consequence of that consultation, the Statistical Commission adopted the same set of Fundamental Principles in 1994. The Member States supported the Principles as critical in safeguarding the independence, the quality, and the role of the national statistical systems. Many Member States also indicated that the general intent of the Principles was already in force and incorporated in their statistical laws, institutions and practices.

II. Implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

4. Following the adoption of the Fundamental Principles, national statistical offices started explicitly to make reference to the Principles in various ways in their public communication. The Principles were translated into national languages and disseminated within the national statistical system and on their websites. The Principles have shaped the formulation of the statistical laws in many countries. The European Statistics Code of Practices also incorporated the basic elements of the Principles.

5. The Statistical Division undertook a variety of efforts to promote these new Principles. In 2000 it established a website with a country practices database, which provided reference material from countries on the Principles. The revised third edition of the *Handbook of Statistical Organization*[1] released in 2003 elaborated and

[1] *Handbook of Statistical Organization, Third Edition: The Operation and Organization of a Statistical Agency, United Nations* (New York, 2003) United Nations publication, Sales No. E.03.XVII.7.

contributed to promoting the Fundamental Principles. The Statistical Division also organized workshops on statistical organization and management, which make reference to the Fundamental Principles. In 2004, on the occasion of their tenth anniversary, a flyer with the Fundamental Principles was designed and widely distributed.

6. Expanding on the country practices website, the Statistical Division launched in July 2006 the Development of National Statistical Systems website, to serve as the knowledge centre on official statistics. The website is now a searchable repository, providing information on current practices in national statistical systems around the world, and international guidelines on statistical organizations. It contains documentations on country profiles of national statistical systems, key features of national statistical systems and good practices in national statistical systems, which gives examples of how countries are implementing the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, in order to assist countries in the development of their national statistical system.

III. 2004 report on the implementation of the Fundamental Principles

7. In anticipation of the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Fundamental Principles in 2004, the United Nations Statistical Commission had asked the Statistics Division to conduct a global review of the implementation of the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and to prepare a report,[2] which was discussed at the thirty-fifth session of the Commission in March 2004. That session marked the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Fundamental Principles by the Commission.

8. The report was based on 112 country replies to a Statistical Division questionnaire requesting national statistical offices to report their experiences with the Fundamental Principles in a uniform way. On the basis of analysis of the responses, it was observed that the Principles were remarkably well implemented. The Principles on confidentiality (principle 6) and legislation (principle 7) were the best implemented principles, although a significant number of incidents of disclosure had been reported and quite a few countries had mentioned that their law was outdated. On the other hand, the Principles on prevention of misuse (principle 4) and national coordination (principle 8) seemed to be the least implemented principles. According to the survey, major problem areas that prevented better implementation of the Principles included authorized and unauthorized disclosure of individual data for non-statistical purposes; political interference at the dissemination stage; the need to adapt international standards to national circumstances; and lack of resources.

9. In its report on its thirty-fifth session (E/2004/24 and Corr.1), the Commission welcomed the fact that the review showed considerable progress in the implementation of the Principles while revealing some of the barriers to their fuller implementation. Among other recommendations, the Commission considered that a review of the implementation of the Fundamental Principles achieved by other producers of official statistics besides national statistical offices would be useful.

[2] E/CN.3/2004/21.

The Commission reaffirmed that the Fundamental Principles should be broadly applied by all national statistical systems and considered that a compendium of best practices for their implementation would be helpful and considered that more advocacy was needed. The Commission also welcomed the work of the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities in drafting principles of statistics for international statistical services. These principles were later recognized by the Statistical Commission in 2006.

IV. Recent developments

10. In the past years, a number of incidents have arisen that clearly violate the intent and the provisions of the Principles. As these issues fall within national jurisdiction, they were not brought to the attention of, nor discussed by, the Statistical Commission. On some occasions, the global statistical community informally expressed its disappointment that the Principles were not strictly adhered to nor were they enforced by a global body.

11. In informal consultation with the Member States, the following specific questions arose:

(a) Whether it is desirable for the Principles to be redrafted to make them more declarative and unambiguous with a stronger preamble;

(b) Whether it is desirable to conduct periodic reviews of the Principles through national reports and peer review;

(c) Whether the Commission should take specific actions on the national implementation of the Principles.

12. In order to allow for a more in-depth exchange of views among senior official statisticians on these important questions, the Statistics Division is organizing a high-level forum to be held on 21 February 2011 on the topic "Fundamental Principles for Official Statistics: threats and responses". Several keynote speakers will introduce the various principles and will discuss the challenges related to their implementation. Furthermore, there will be an open debate on possible ways to support improved implementation of the Fundamental Principles. A summary of the main conclusions and possible recommendations of this high-level forum will be made available to the Commission in the form of an oral statement.

V. Points for discussion

13. **The Commission is invited to:**

(a) **Give guidance on the issues raised in paragraph 11;**

(b) **Consider appropriate mechanisms to further refine or reformulate the Fundamental Principles and to strengthen their implementation;**

(c) **Consider appropriate actions to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Fundamental Principles in 2014 by the United Nations Statistical Commission.**

Annex

Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics

Preamble

The Statistical Commission,

Bearing in mind that official statistical information is an essential basis for development in the economic, demographic, social and environmental fields and for mutual knowledge and trade among the States and peoples of the world,

Bearing in mind that the essential trust of the public in official statistical information depends to a large extent on respect for the fundamental values and principles which are the basis of any society which seeks to understand itself and to respect the rights of its members,

Bearing in mind that the quality of official statistics, and thus the quality of the information available to the Government, the economy and the public depends largely on the cooperation of citizens, enterprises and other respondents in providing appropriate and reliable data needed for necessary statistical compilations and on the cooperation between users and producers of statistics in order to meet users' needs,

Recalling the efforts of governmental and non-governmental organizations active in statistics to establish standards and concepts to allow comparisons among countries,

Recalling also the International Statistical Institute Declaration on Professional Ethics,

Having expressed the opinion that resolution C (47), adopted by the Economic Commission for Europe on 15 April 1992, is of universal significance,

Noting that, at its eighth session, held in Bangkok in November 1993, the Working Group of Statistical Experts, assigned by the Committee on Statistics of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific to examine the Fundamental Principles, had agreed in principle to the ECE version and had emphasized that those principles were applicable to all nations,

Noting also that, at its eighth session, held at Addis Ababa in March 1994, the Joint Conference of African Planners, Statisticians and Demographers considered that the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics are of universal significance,

Adopts the present principles of official statistics:

Principle 1. Official statistics provide an indispensable element in the information system of a democratic society, serving the Government, the economy and the public with data about the economic, demographic, social and environmental situation. To this end, official statistics that meet the test of practical utility are to be compiled and made available on an impartial basis by official statistical agencies to honour citizens' entitlement to public information.

Principle 2. To retain trust in official statistics, the statistical agencies need to decide according to strictly professional considerations, including scientific

principles and professional ethics, on the methods and procedures for the collection, processing, storage and presentation of statistical data.

Principle 3. To facilitate a correct interpretation of the data, the statistical agencies are to present information according to scientific standards on the sources, methods and procedures of the statistics.

Principle 4. The statistical agencies are entitled to comment on erroneous interpretation and misuse of statistics.

Principle 5. Data for statistical purposes may be drawn from all types of sources, be they statistical surveys or administrative records. Statistical agencies are to choose the source with regard to quality, timeliness, costs and the burden on respondents.

Principle 6. Individual data collected by statistical agencies for statistical compilation, whether they refer to natural or legal persons, are to be strictly confidential and used exclusively for statistical purposes.

Principle 7. The laws, regulations and measures under which the statistical systems operate are to be made public.

Principle 8. Coordination among statistical agencies within countries is essential to achieve consistency and efficiency in the statistical system.

Principle 9. The use by statistical agencies in each country of international concepts, classifications and methods promotes the consistency and efficiency of statistical systems at all official levels.

Principle 10. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation in statistics contributes to the improvement of systems of official statistics in all countries.